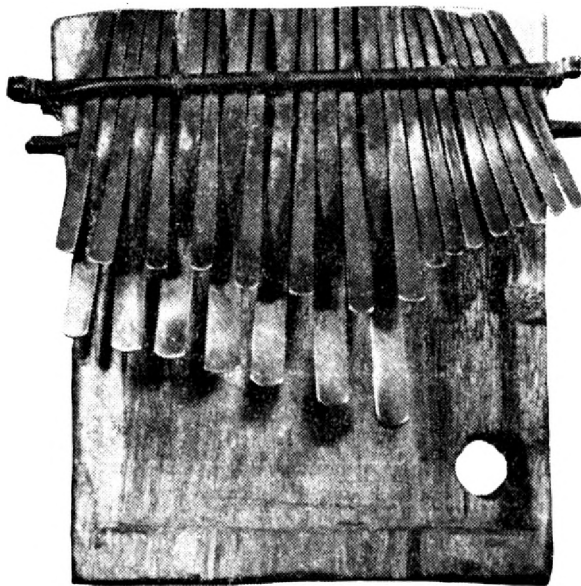


THREE TUNES FOR 'MBIRA DZA VADZIMU'

by

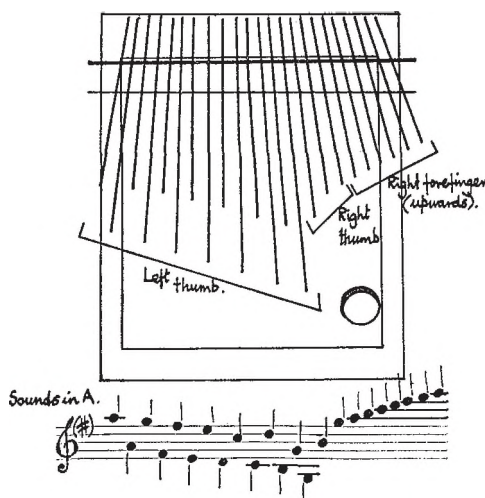
ANDREW TRACEY



Photograph by courtesy of the Cape Argus.

The *Mbira dza vadzimu* is the oldest known form of mbira to be played by the Shona people of Southern Rhodesia. Parts of ancient mbiras, probably of this type, have been found at Zimbabwe; early travellers report that Shona chiefs kept large mbira bands; it is the only type of mbira that is — or was — played by all the Shona peoples; the equivalent instrument is also played by two neighbouring tribes of the Shona, the Venda of the northern Transvaal (*mbira dza*), and the Korekore of northeastern Southern Rhodesia (*madebe dza mbondoro*). Everywhere it is associated with the worship of the spirits. (*vadzimu*, *mbondoro*), which is a certain sign of at least some degree of antiquity. In some parts of the country it has been ousted by the *njari*, an importation from the Sena/-Nyungwe tribe at Tete on the Zambesi (see "Mbira Music of Jege A. Tapera" *African Music*, Vol. 2, No. 4. p. 45), but in some areas it appears to be having a slight revival of popularity.

In Harare township, Salisbury, for instance, there are at least seven youngish men playing the instrument, whereas the *njari* appears to be played mainly by older men. The centre of this revival of interest seems to be in the reserves to the east of Salisbury, particularly Nyandoro reserve, which is the home of most of the players I met in Salisbury in September, 1963. It was very encouraging to find the *mbira dza vadzimu* being played so enthusiastically, in duets and trios, and by young men.



This diagram of an *mbira dza vadzimu*, made by Chali, of Nyandoro reserve, in 1960, is to demonstrate the layout of the notes. Its distinctive and recognisable characteristic is its division into two parts by pitch, all the treble notes (but one, which is always played in unison with its treble octave) being in the right hand, and all the bass notes in the left. In all other types of Rhodesian and lower Zambesi valley mbiras the keys to be played by the two hands overlap in pitch, resulting in different-sounding instruments, where the phenomenon of “inherent rhythms”, as explained so well by Gerhard Kubik, is more prominent (see African Music Volume 3 No. 1, Page 33 “The Phenomenon of Inherent Rhythms in East and Central African Instrumental Music” by Gerhard Kubik.)

With the separation of the pitch of the two hands on a solo *mbira dza vadzimu*, inherent rhythms do not play a very great part. However, when they are played in duets and trios, that is when they really come to life, with resultant rhythms and tunes in at least three different registers standing out clearly. Gwanzura Gwenze, of Chakaoma village, Masembura reserve, from whom I learned the three tunes that follow, described a session at which he had been playing the previous night: “The sound was very good”, he said, “We were *three dezes*”. Deze actually means the calabash inside which each mbira is resonated, but the word is often used to mean the mbira itself. Unfortunately I was only able to learn these tunes for a solo mbira, but it is possible to make a duet of the first two tunes, and this gives some nice rhythmic interplay. The third tune, “Mahororo”, shows another method of rhythmic organisation, but in spite of general chordal similarity, and the fact that it is said to have originated from “Nyamaropa”, it is a different tune.

The Nyungwe *Nsani* and the *Mbira dza vaNdau* have, in principle, separation of the two hands in pitch, like the *mbira dza vadzimu*, but their scale ascends right across from left to right of the board, while ours ascends outwards from the middle of the board (i.e. the bass part of the layout is reversed).

Two other distinguishing features of the *mbira dza vadzimu* are the wall at the lower end of the soundboard, making the board tray-shaped (see the picture), and the hole in the lower right hand corner of the board, into which you put your right little finger, from the top side, to steady the instrument while playing. (Some instruments have been found for left-handed players, where everything is reversed).

Rhythmically, the three tunes are organised in standard African instrumental patterns of $\frac{1}{4}$ and $\frac{6}{8}$ times, similar to those I have described for the Shona *chisansi* or *karimba*

mbira ("African Music" p. 51 seq. Volume 2 No. 4. 'The Mbira Music of Jeje Tapera' by Andrew Tracey.)

Like Tapera's karimba music, this music is based on a chord sequence, but the sequence is twice the length of his. The first part corresponds exactly, the chord sequence being:

TONIC,	mediant,	DOMINANT;
TONIC,	mediant,	SUBMEDIANT.

Then the second part adds the other remaining diatonic chords:

TONIC,	SUBDOMINANT,	submediante;
SUPERTONIC	—	submediant.

The main structural chords are printed in capitals; the others are what I call "passing chords", that are not usually emphasised. They are played on the mbira, but not necessarily sung in full by the singers. A full performance includes, apart from mbiras, rattles and drums, any number of voices, singing in three or four different ranges, from the bass *kubongera* part through humming and various tune parts to the top yodelling *kunguridzira* part. All these parts follow the chords as being played on the mbira, which leaves one in little doubt that a chord sequence is one of the most important regulative features of Shona mbira music. I hope eventually to be able to produce more musical evidence of this. In the meantime, here are the three tunes that are all I was able to learn in the time I had.

The small notes, mostly in the right hand part, indicate alternative parts. It is also possible to play long sequences of top D's in the right hand part instead of the notes written, when the excitement of the music calls for it.

The written notes refer, properly speaking, to the Shona tuning for *mbira dza vadzimu* in the Nyandoro area, which I have not measured myself. However, it sounds very near to, if not identical to the average Shona mbira tuning worked out for a large number of mbiras by my father. (Volume 2 No. 4 "African Music" page 48. 'The Mbira Music of Jeje Tapera' by Andrew Tracey.)

Tuning of the Mbira dza vadzimu in cents.

162	181	173	168	168	178	170	
0	162	343	516	684	852	1030	1200

NYAMAROPA 1

5

RH

LH

RH

LH

Fine.

KUMBU! (exclamation)

Part of song.

KA-NA NDIKAPA KANA NDIKAPA etc.

NYAMAROPA 2

8v. -----

RH LH

Fine.

Detailed description: This musical score is for a piece titled 'NYAMAROPA 2'. It is written for two staves, RH (Right Hand) and LH (Left Hand). The RH staff is in treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a 4/4 time signature. It begins with a dashed line labeled '8v.' above it. The LH staff is in bass clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a 4/4 time signature. The piece ends with a 'Fine.' marking. The notation includes various note values, rests, and a repeat sign in the RH staff.

MAHORORO

8v. -----

RH LH

Alternative second line

Detailed description: This musical score is for a piece titled 'MAHORORO'. It is written for two staves, RH (Right Hand) and LH (Left Hand). The RH staff is in treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a 4/4 time signature. It begins with a dashed line labeled '8v.' above it. The LH staff is in bass clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a 4/4 time signature. The piece includes an 'Alternative second line' for the RH staff. The notation includes various note values, rests, and a repeat sign in the RH staff.